

SOME THOUGHTS ON POSSIBLE CHALLENGES FOR A MELANESIAN THEOLOGY

– **Michael Tavo**

The question of Melanesian theology has been in the minds of many Melanesians for a good number of years. Many Melanesians have tried to deal with this issue themselves. One of the Conferences of MATS, held at Martin Luther Seminary in July, 1976, dwelt, among other things, on the theme of “Indigenisation of Theology”, in other words, a theology that would speak meaningfully to Melanesians. This search has led many Melanesian thinkers to produce books, pamphlets, theses, and papers to present the point that the gospel must be understood in the Melanesian context, and that many Melanesian concepts may very well cast some new light, and subsequently enrich our common faith in Christ. They have argued favouring the Melanesian position in this respect. But none of these works bears the official title Melanesian Theology, although some sound theological views have been expressed.

These materials that have been produced so far, and many others that will probably be produced, do indeed have some ground upon which a Melanesian theology can be done. However, before this can be done, many important obstacles must be clarified so as to avoid any stereotype theology that will appear Melanesian in its approach and outlook, yet does not speak the Melanesian language. One of these important problems is that Melanesians are racially one people, but differ greatly from one society to another. This can be seen right across the spectrum of the so-called “Melanesian Region”, which extends from Fiji in the East to Papua New Guinea in the West, from New Caledonia in the South to the Solomons and

Vanuatu in the centre. These Melanesian countries do represent a vast diversity of beliefs and ideologies. This is reflected in, and characterised by, their differing societies and cultures. However, one could say that there are some basic similarities that tend to hold together many of these views. On the other hand, there are also some great underlying differences that identify each particular society and culture, as such within the Melanesian Region. Therefore, in that context, such a general approach will not be a good enough basis for Melanesian theology, as such, because it will not fully express Melanesian thoughts.

Melanesians are the product of the diverse and rich cultures of varying societies. These cultures were the backbone of Melanesian identity and uniqueness. Therefore, philosophy, ideology, and theological beliefs were drawn from this vast and rich background. But, at the same time, without discarding all these aspects of Melanesianness, one has also to take into account the second most important problem, that is, Melanesians of today no longer live as their forefathers did in days past. In other words, Melanesians have, over the centuries, developed – mentally, spiritually, politically, and economically – very fast. These developments have changed and shaped the mentality of modern Melanesians to think as Melanesians, yet, at the same time, differently from their forefathers. This does not mean deviation from the norms, but rather the application of their Melanesianness in the light of their environment.

Melanesian theology in this context has to be able to answer, as well as to give meaning to life, where Melanesians struggle and search for meaningfulness within the traditional and the present-changing societies. Melanesian theology has to speak and express its thoughts meaningfully in order to maintain the link between the two most important dimensions of the Melanesian way of life, which are reflected in the term “Old and Modern”; whether or not to do away with such things as traditional beliefs, etc., and dwell entirely on contemporary

issues that are directly affecting Melanesians here and now. The other extreme, of course, is to go back to the many traditional concepts. The question one would ask then is whether or not either direction is better without the other, or whether both could be taken into account. Whatever the solution is, it is obvious that this is one of the very important issues that must be considered, so as to avoid the proposed Melanesian theology being branded as the “Theology of the Gap” that speaks to no one and thus becomes outdated theology.

What Theology Would a Melanesian Theology Be?

The deciding principle for a Melanesian theology has to be *Christian* in its perspective. This would differentiate it from being entirely traditional, as well as from being absorbed into what may seem to be a philosophical assumption, thus becoming abstract. However, it must be a Melanesian theological reflection on what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do, as Melanesians develop in this competitive and changing world. Traditions are important so as to maintain the uniqueness of Melanesianness, but they must not be a hindrance to the dynamic perspective of the changing Melanesian in his or her application of the traditions in the light of his or her new environment.

In saying this, the question still remains as to what particular direction should this proposed Melanesian theology pursue. In view of the many outstanding differences that challenge the formulation of a Melanesian theology, the questions one would ask are as follows:

- a. Will a Melanesian theology be a compromise theology, where it will take into account the varying views among the Melanesian societies within the Melanesian region and systematise them and call this work a Melanesian theology?

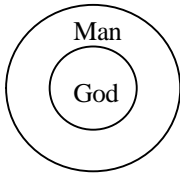
- b. Will a Melanesian theology be a regional theology, that is, a theology that will be produced within our different regions of Melanesia, and refer to that as a Melanesian theology?
- c. What particular perspective should a proposed Melanesian theology pursue:
 - i. Traditional concepts, ideologies, and beliefs, or
 - ii. Reflecting the growth of Melanesians today; or should both be considered?
- d. Will this proposed Melanesian theology be done by individual Melanesians?

Whatever the answer is to these questions, and the many other likely questions, it is obvious that these are among some underlying issues that must be considered in our search for a possible honest Melanesian theology.

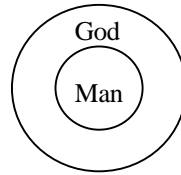
Food For Thought

The Christian gospel has been in Melanesia for over a century. The concern now is to find a way in which the gospel of Jesus Christ may be understood within the Melanesian context. Much of our theological understanding has been shaped in the Western theological mould, and further shaped by our denominational mould. However, one cannot, as yet, argue otherwise, for the issue now is the Melanesian theological mould, with its possible new theological dimension that will be conducive to our understanding of the Christian gospel as Melanesians.

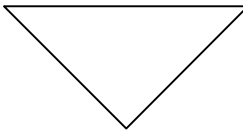
Western Theological Mould:



New Melanesian Theological Mould
with its possible new dimension:



Gospel: God-given



Culture: Melanesian way of life
(man-made)

Incarnation

Will it be a compromise?